Obama urges us to shape the future

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Body

When Barack Obama left the White House in 2016, I wondered on what future issues he would direct his leadership. The Obama Foundation mandate appeared to focus on developing young civic leaders internationally, and he's continued to actively speak on climate action initiatives.

The Economic Club of Canada (ECC) and the Global Institute for Conscious Economics held an event on Thursday, at which Obama brought his voice to another significant challenge of our time: preparing Canadians for the future of work.

The six-women leadership team that powers the ECC did an exemplary job of ensuring there was a diverse set of change-makers present for the dialogue, including 6,000 business leaders, policy-makers, educators, entrepreneurs and students across generations. It was refreshing to enter a forum on economic inclusion that was reflective of the diversity of Canada.

In her opening remarks, Kiana 'Rookz' Eastmond, founder and director of Sandbox Studios, encouraged those present to take responsibility individually for the success of the diverse range of leaders in the room, "Don't leave here without opening a door for someone else."

A 2018 World Economic Forum report on the future work, surveying companies representing 15 million workers spanning 12 industries, expected a shift from an average of 71 per cent of total task hours performed by humans and 29 per cent by machines in 2018, to 58 per cent of task hours performed by humans and a whopping 42 per cent by machines by 2022.

Automation affects all work, from repetitive tasks on assembly lines to office environments and working from home. Obama spoke of the unique skills humans bring to the knowledge economy: imagination, empathy, creativity, analytical thinking, meaningful connection and the ability to build a team.

The former president's talk not only touched on who is creating opportunities for workers to improve their skills, but also on furthering the need to look after the physical and mental well being of the labour force as we collectively face economic vulnerability and social isolation.

He shared his personal process for effective problem solving, and underscored the need to ensure there is a diversity of viewpoints at the table to make data-informed decisions, with feedback systems in place to course correct as needed. Obama emphasized the importance of being ambitious in leadership and not spending all of your time avoiding mistakes.

He spoke directly to the need to rethink our education systems, which were designed primarily for the agricultural and industrial ages.

According to a 2019 report by the World Bank: "The days of staying in one job, or with one company, for decades, are waning. In the gig economy, workers will likely have many gigs over the course of their careers, which means they will have to be lifelong learners."

Whether it's an autoworker attempting a new career path, with great courage later in life, a young entrepreneur forced into a precarious work situation and trying to adapt, or a mother looking to re-enter the workforce while growing her family, our education systems should be accessible and adaptable to equip Canadians of all ages for success.

It can be overwhelming for individuals looking to re-enter our education systems and understand the resources that are available, especially those who are diligently climbing out of existing student debt. People require a level of predictability for funding and support when weighing the opportunity cost of continuing their education.

Obama brought a global context to this Canadian dialogue, sharing how our efforts to innovate and collaborate toward an inclusive economy at home should be balanced with international aid education efforts as well.

The government of Canada has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in examining the trends affecting workers, with the aim of identifying emerging skills and developing and testing fresh approaches.

I hope the relevant stakeholders in business, education and labour can come together and put aside ulterior motives to continue addressing these mutual challenges.

President Obama's presence was a reminder that rather than fearing the future, we must seize this moment to take it in our hands and collectively shape it.

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